



LAST MONTH IN BURMA

News from and about Burma

JULY
2012

International community fails to act as crisis continues in Arakan State

Following communal violence in June, in which thousands of Arakan (Rakhine) and Rohingya people were displaced, there is a growing humanitarian and human rights crisis.

Information is difficult to verify as the Burmese authorities have blocked or limited access for international aid workers, monitors and journalists. However, in the past few weeks, there have been reports that Burmese police, security forces and soldiers have committed human rights abuses, including rape, looting, torture and arbitrarily killing Rohingya people.

There have been mass arrests, with Rohingya people kept in detention camps without trial, without food or medical services. An estimated 100,000 internally displaced people are in various locations. United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), has said that it has so far distributed 6,000 family kits containing plastic sheets, sleeping mats, blankets, mosquito nets and kitchen sets. However, the vast majority of those in need have not received proper assistance. 10 UN and NGO (non-government organisation) aid workers, including 6 local staff from Medecins Sans Frontieres, have been arrested and remain in detention.

Thein Sein, the President of Burma, has proposed a policy that amounts to ethnic cleansing, asking the United Nations to arrange for Rohingya people to be removed from Burma and sent to third countries. He told a delegation from UNHCR that "it is not at all possible to recognise the illegal border-crossing Rohingyas who are not an ethnic [group] in Burma." He proposed that the UNHCR set up camps for the Rohingya before they could then be sent to any third country "that are willing to take them".

On 27 July, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Navi Pillay said, "We have been receiving a stream of reports from independent sources alleging discriminatory and arbitrary responses by security forces, and even their instigation of and involvement in clashes. Reports indicate that the initial swift response of the authorities to the communal violence may have turned into a crackdown targeting Muslims, in particular members of the Rohingya community."

Despite the scale of the humanitarian and human rights crisis, there has been very limited action from the international community. Britain, which used to take the lead in mobilising the international community to respond to human rights and humanitarian crises in Burma, now seems to focus more on positive news. British Foreign Secretary William Hague has been silent on the current crisis in Arakan State.

At a news conference in Rangoon on 30 July, Union Immigration Minister Khin Yi rejected a call from the United Nations to investigate reports of abuses by security forces. According to Democratic Voice of Burma, he also said that the Rohingya would not be included in Burma's national census in 2014.

The Rohingya are a persecuted Muslim minority group in Burma subject to human rights abuses and denied citizenship. Human rights organisations have called for Burma's 1982 Citizenship Law to be repealed and replaced with a new law founded on basic principles of human rights. The Citizenship Law, which was introduced by General Ne Win in 1982, arbitrarily stripped many people in Burma of the right to citizenship, including the Rohingya.



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US lifts investment sanctions

On 11 July, the US lifted restrictions on US investment in Burma. In a statement, President Obama said “Today, the United States is easing restrictions to allow US companies to responsibly do business in Burma.”

The statement also said that “the United States Government remains deeply concerned about the lack of transparency in Burma’s investment environment and the military’s role in the economy.”

The decision, which allows US companies to invest in state-owned Myanma Oil and Gas Enterprise (MOGE), has been criticised by human rights groups.

“By allowing deals with Burma’s state-owned oil company, the US looks like it caved to industry pressure and undercut Aung San Suu Kyi and others in Burma who are promoting government accountability,” said Arvind Ganesan, Human Rights Watch’s director for business and human rights.

Several US human rights groups, including US Campaign for Burma and United to End Genocide, expressed concern at the decision “to allow investments into businesses connected to the Burmese regime that are corrupt and help to fuel human rights violations. As it stands now, investment in many of the most attractive sectors of the Burmese economy is likely to worsen the human rights situation while directly benefitting individuals and entities responsible for rights abuses, who contribute to corruption, or are otherwise acting to obstruct political reform.”

Student activists arrested

Around 20-30 student and youth activists were arrested on 6th and 7th July, ahead of the 50th anniversary on 7th July of soldiers storming Rangoon University, killing students and dynamiting the student union building. Some of those arrested had planned a memorial event for the anniversary.

The arrests happened in a coordinated way in several cities across the country. Some of those arrested were among those political prisoners released from jail in January this year. The activists were released the following day.

The arrests took place despite a new law being passed supposedly legalising protests. At the time there were warnings that the law was far from adequate, and still enabled the government to arrest at will. The law legalising protests is one of the very few legal changes actually made in Burma.

The arrests relate to sensitivity about past human rights abuses by the dictatorship. They are yet more evidence that Thein Sein’s government refuses to address the issues of truth, justice and accountability for the many and serious crimes that have been committed.

Aung San Suu Kyi makes first speech in Parliament

On 9 July, Aung San Suu Kyi made her first speech in Parliament since being elected on 1 April. She used the speech to call for laws to protect ethnic rights.

She called for laws to ensure ethnic rights were guaranteed “based on equality, mutual respect and confidence for the emergence of a genuine democratic union.”

She was speaking in support of legislation proposed by the ruling Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP). However, the proposal is largely limited to rights relating to ethnic languages and cultures.



Aung San Suu Kyi speaks to MPs in the Lower House of Burma’s Parliament. (Photo: The Irrawaddy)

“I would like to urge all lawmakers to enact necessary laws or amend laws to protect the rights of ethnic nationalities. Furthermore, the flames of war are not completely extinguished. Therefore, it can be seen that protecting the rights of the ethnic minorities is more broad-based than preserving languages and cultures.

“It also cannot be detached from the Panglong spirit which is based on equality and mutual respect. Keeping this in mind, we, all of us parliamentarians, must work together to amend the laws as necessary to be able to protect ethnic rights as well as to develop a truly democratic nation,” Aung San Suu Kyi said.

UK Government Report: Human Rights abuses continue in Burma

The British Foreign and Commonwealth Office has published its annual report on Human Rights and Democracy for 2011 in July.

Despite some welcome reforms, the report highlights on-going serious human rights abuses in Burma.

The report states that “the situation in some ethnic minority areas worsened”, and goes on to document on-going human rights abuses which could be classified as possible war crimes and crimes against humanity, including:

- “In March, the Burmese Army moved into areas of Shan State held by ethnic armed forces. We received reports that seven villages were razed to the ground, and civilians indiscriminately targeted. An estimated 30,000 people fled their homes.”
- “In June, conflict broke out in Kachin State, bringing a 17-year ceasefire to an end. Human rights abuses targeting civilians were reported, including torture, rape and unverified reports of murder. There were allegations that the Kachin Independence Army was also using forced portering and child soldiers.”
- “We have continued to receive reports of gender-based violence by the military in conflict areas; the Burmese government has done little to investigate these cases.”
- “The use of child soldiers continued to be a problem in the Burmese military and some armed ethnic groups.”

However, the report does not document all the on-going human rights abuses. Of particular concern, given that the report was released on the same day the Foreign Secretary announced a major new initiative on rape and sexual violence in conflict, is the lack of specific focus on the big increase in the use of rape and sexual violence by the Burmese Army against ethnic minority women, especially in Shan and Kachin States.

The 2011 Human Rights and Democracy Report can be viewed at: <http://fcohrdreport.readandcomment.com/human-rights-in-countries-of-concern/burma/>

UK opens trade office in Rangoon

The British government opened a trade office in Rangoon on 11 July 2012. The office was opened during a trade delegation of 24 British companies, led by Lord Marland, Chairman of UK Trade & Investment’s Business Ambassadors’ Group.

The delegation held meetings in Naypyitaw with the Speaker of the Lower House Shwe Mann, Ministers for Industry, Finance, Transport, Agriculture, Energy and Electric Power, the Deputy Minister for Commerce and the Attorney General. They also met Aung San Suu Kyi.

The trade office was opened on the same day that President Thein Sein proposed his policy that amounts to ethnic cleansing, asking the United Nations to arrange for Rohingya people to be sent to third countries.

25 political prisoners released – hundreds still remain in prison

On 3 July, the military-backed government in Burma announced the release of 25 political prisoners.

Three of the activists released in July, Aye Aung, Khun Kawrio and Than Zaw, were cases that were highlighted as part of Burma Campaign UK’s new campaign, No Political Prisoner Left Behind, which highlights a different political prisoner case every month.



Aye Aung, Khun Kawrio and Than Zaw, who were among those released on 3 July.

While the release of political prisoners is very welcome, there are still hundreds of political prisoners in jail. Human rights organisations, including Burma Campaign UK, are calling for a joint domestic and international board, with the involvement of the UN, to investigate how many political prisoners remain in Burma’s jails and secure their release as soon as possible.

Concerns over Norwegian ethnic peace fund

A coalition of Karen community-based organisations has expressed concerns that the Myanmar Peace Support Initiative (MPSI) lacks transparency and involvement from communities.

The Myanmar Peace Support Initiative is a Norwegian led initiative to support the ceasefires in Burma, principally by providing funds for development.

In a statement, the groups said, "We are grateful that Norway has shown concern and a willingness to try to help move peace forward here ... Peace funds are not a substitute for and should not undermine a comprehensive peace process."

The statement said the initiative's failure to consult local communities has resulted in infrastructure development being targeted at areas villagers do not want to relocate to, because they will be unable to access their agricultural land. Community-based groups were not given adequate information or opportunity to be properly consulted regarding the plans.

"Given those problems, we ask MPSI and other proponents of donor-driven peace funds not to undermine our peace process, but rather to move to a more inclusive and transparent process," it said. "MPSI should not take shortcuts or sow division within our leadership and our community in a bid to rush the deployment funds."

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& Development in Burma**